

VI. EXPANSION PLAN

INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina State Parks System already includes some of the state's most beautiful scenery and significant natural resources. While substantial financial resources are needed to complete the land acquisition and development envisioned in the master plans for the existing parks, expansion of the system will nevertheless be important in the coming years for the following reasons:

As North Carolina's population grows and becomes more urbanized, state parks will see more and more visitation. Increased public use can result in damage to sensitive natural resources in the parks and a decrease in the visitors' enjoyment of their experience. Demand for more constructed facilities, including trails, can result in smaller portions of each park remaining natural and undisturbed. Overcrowding impedes each visitor's ability to move freely and to fully enjoy the natural setting without undue distraction or conflict with other visitors. Adding acreage to existing parks can help to address these problems, but more parks will also be needed to meet future demand without overcrowding.

Population growth and economic development also result in the loss of important natural areas. Wildlife habitat is becoming further fragmented, many species of plants and animals are dwindling in number, and high quality examples of North Carolina's great diversity of natural communities are being damaged every day. Of 1,775 identified Significant Natural Heritage Areas, over 900 remain unprotected in private ownership. Public concern is growing over these continuing losses and the increasing vulnerability of remaining undisturbed areas. Opportunities to include high quality representation of significant natural resource themes within the State Parks System should be seized before they are lost.

The State Parks System is far from complete. The system is intended to include representative examples of North Carolina's archaeological, geological, biological, scenic, and recreational resources. Of 108 resource themes within these categories, described in Chapter IV, only 29 are considered to be adequately represented in the existing system. Thirteen resource themes have little representation in any geographic region, and four have no representation at all. With regard to recreational resources, the population in four geographic regions has little access to the state parks system's recreation resources, as shown in Chapter IV.

Carefully selected new park units will enhance the value of the system as a whole and will help the system to fulfill its statutory purpose for future generations.

EXISTING SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

State Parks

There are currently 30 State Parks in the system. Generally, State Parks are expected to possess both significant natural resource values and significant recreational values. State Parks are expected to accommodate the development of facilities, but may vary in the extent of development depending upon what can be provided without damage to the scenic or natural features. The establishment of any new State Park would include the expectation that the park would eventually be open to the public with some level of public facilities provided.

State Natural Areas

State Natural Areas were established as a separate type of system unit in 1963 with the adoption of separate principles for management. There are currently 13 State Natural Areas. The purpose of State Natural Areas is to preserve and protect areas of scientific, aesthetic, or ecological value. Generally, recreational activities such as camping, swimming, or picnicking are not provided for in State Natural Areas. Unlike a State Park, the long term management objectives for a State Natural Area may include little or no public facilities and very limited public access. Of the 12 existing State Natural Areas, two have on-site staff. Seven areas are managed as satellites of staffed State Park units, and three are managed by other conservation agencies under leases or special agreements.

State Recreation Areas

State Recreation Areas are sites where the primary purpose is outdoor recreation, rather than preservation. More intensive development of facilities is provided than in State Parks. Protection and enjoyment of the natural resources are still important, and the sites are expected to contain scenic and attractive natural features. There are currently four State Recreation Areas, which together receive about one-third of the total State Parks System's annual visitation. These areas reduce the visitor demand on the park areas with more sensitive resources.

State Trails

The North Carolina Trails System Act was passed in 1973 to help provide for the state's outdoor recreation needs and to promote public access to natural and scenic areas. The Trails System includes "park trails", which are designated and managed as units of the State Parks System known as State Trails, and "designated trails", which are managed by other governmental agencies or corporations. There are currently three State Trails in the system.

State Rivers

The Natural and Scenic Rivers System was created by the 1971 General Assembly to preserve and protect certain free flowing rivers, their water quality and their adjacent lands. Currently there are only four State Rivers: The Lumber River and segments of the New, Linville and Horsepasture Rivers. Three are located in the mountain region and one in the southern coastal plain region. River segments are also contained in state parks, such as Gorges State Park in the mountains and Eno River State Park in the Piedmont. No rivers are protected in the tidewater region, central and northern coastal plain region, or the western Piedmont and no brownwater or tidal rivers are protected by the State Parks System.

State Lakes

Chapter 165 of the Laws of 1929 specified that “all lakes now belonging to the State having an area of 50 acres or more” should be “administered as provided for other recreational areas now owned by the State.” This allowed the then-Department of Conservation and Development to assume management authority for seven Coastal Plain lakes. These lakes later became units of the State Parks System known as State Lakes. Most of these are administratively included as part of an adjoining State Park, but one of the lakes, White Lake, has no public ownership on its shoreline.

SYSTEM EXPANSION PRIORITIES

Addition of new units to the State Parks System should focus on preserving sites of statewide significance and on ensuring that representative examples of the state’s resources are protected. The evaluation of the existing system presented in Chapter IV identifies very high expansion needs and high expansion needs, based on the current representation of each resource theme within the system. Thirty five resource themes are identified as very high expansion needs, and 41 themes are identified as high expansion needs for archeological, geological, scenic and biological resources (Table VI-1).

Table VI-1. Representation of Archeological, Geological, Biological and Scenic Themes

Resource Category	Number of Themes	Very High Expansion Needs	High Expansion Needs	Adequately Represented
Archaeological	36	0	17	16
Geological	23	12	1	10
Biological	32	14	16	2
Scenic	17	9	7	1
TOTAL	108	35	41	29

Among these identified expansion needs, the highest priorities are the four resource themes which currently have no representation in the system, and the thirteen resource themes which have little representation in the system.

THEMES WITH NO REPRESENTATION

- Mafic Glades and Barrens (Biologic)
- Mountain Bogs and Fens (Biologic)
- Coastal Plain Marl Outcrop (Biologic)
- Continental Shelf (Geologic)

THEMES WITH LITTLE REPRESENTATION

- Wet Pine Savannas (Biologic)
- Grass and Heath Balds (Biologic)
- Brownwater Coastal Plain Floodplains (Biologic)
- Piedmont Upland Pools and Depressions (Biologic)
- Upland Seepages and Spray Cliffs (Biologic)
- Coastal Plain Nonalluvial Mineral Wetlands (Biologic)
- Streamhead Pocosins (Biologic)
- Relict coastal Features (Geologic)
- Fossils (Geologic)
- Meadows / Grasslands (Scenic)
- Islands (Scenic)
- Scenic Highways (Scenic)
- Bays / Estuaries (Scenic)

In addition to these four resource categories, expansion should also focus on the fifth resource category – recreation. Unlike biological, geological, archaeological and scenic resources (which occur naturally, are unequally distributed across the state and must be protected where they exist), land and water suitable for outdoor recreation use can usually be located where it will best serve the state's population. Using a model presented in Chapter IV, the acreage of the existing state parks system has been allocated to North Carolina counties. This allocation is presented in the form of park acres/1000 population. Analysis identifies four regions listed below as high priority areas for expanding recreation resources in the state parks system. Larger populations concentrations should have the highest priority.

REGIONS WITH LOW ACRE REPRESENTATION AND HIGH POPULATION:

- Mecklenburg, Union and surrounding counties
- Guilford, Alamance and surrounding counties

REGIONS WITH LOW ACRE REPRESENTATION AND MODERATE POPULATION:

- Lenoir, Pitt, Wayne and surrounding counties.

REGIONS WITH LOW ACRE REPRESENTATION AND LOW POPULATION:

- Cherokee, Clay and Graham counties

EXPANSION CRITERIA

While expansion of the system is important, new parks must be selected carefully to ensure that they contribute to fulfilling the purposes of the system and that they justify the considerable public investment in acquisition and long term management. The Division has developed criteria for evaluating proposed new units to the state parks system. The evaluation criteria provide a method to numerically rank potential sites, as well as a way to remove unsuitable sites from consideration. The evaluation criteria are divided into minimum and measured criteria.

The minimum criteria are used for initial evaluation of proposed park sites. The four basic criteria are:

- Statewide significance of the site's resource themes;
- Size (sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and to provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts to principal resources);
- Absence of incompatible features (through roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution threats); and
- Public access free of limitations inhibiting management and public use

Sites which do not meet these minimum criteria are removed from consideration. If a site meets the minimum criteria requirements, it is then evaluated using measured criteria, which include:

- Number of high priority expansion themes;
- Rarity of theme(s);
- Threat to theme(s);
- Degree of threat / urgency of acquisition;
- Presence of rare and endangered species;
- Interconnection of the site with other protected areas;
- Presence of superlatives (one of a kind, biggest or best example);
- Demand for state parks system units that are staffed and open to the public; and
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation

EVALUATION OF PROPOSED / POTENTIAL SITES

A listing of all known potential sites is being compiled from existing data bases and files. Division files are the primary source for this listing.

Inquiries are made to various local and regional planning boards, colleges and universities, and conservation and preservation groups to add to the list of potential park sites.

All sites are evaluated using the evaluation criteria and suitable sites are scored accordingly.

All scored sites are listed in rank order and then cross-evaluated for potential duplication of theme representation. A master list is being developed.

Sites on the list are compared to the highest ranked units in the existing state parks system; priority groupings will be developed beginning with the most significant and/or desirable additions to the system.

Previous natural and scenic rivers studies are being revisited to determine a new priority list for adding rivers to the system. High priority will be given to including river types not represented in the system and in maintaining a regional balance.